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ABSTRACT

Poems, of a wide variety, which are carefully selected to serve as springboards for discussion for low ability, lower-middle-class high school students can aid in developing individual student taste and interest in poetry. Viewing poetic devices within specific poems (rather than as isolated phenomena), encouraging student attempts at writing original poetry, and calling upon students to suggest some of the poems to be studied, were a few of the techniques which proved effective in this unit taught at H Point Senior High School, Beltsville, Maryland. (MF)

How the Daffodils Pale

SUSAN STONE¹

Through her acquaintance with a wide range of poetry and through her appreciation of the specific interests and abilities of her students, Mrs. Stone was able to create an atmosphere conducive to the enjoyment of reading and writing verse.

THEY LOOKED AT ME, horror mirrored in every face. Oh, no! Dowehavta? Jeez!

Every angry little face was a portrait in anguish. Had I prescribed an evil-tasting medicine? Raised the driving age? Supported a twelve-month school year?

I

Hardly. I had mentioned casually ("By the way . . .") that on Monday we'd be beginning a unit of poetry. Sound innocent enough? Ordinarily, yes, but the class before me was composed of thirty low ability, lower middle class, sophomore discipline problems who obviously did not consider poetry "their thing."

How nice then to hear, "hey, this is neat stuff" four short weeks later, and to find a veteran of four disciplinary suspensions writing expressive haiku like

Little children sit
Soldiers running through their land
Death everywhere now

In fact, I was so pleased with the outcome of the unit that I'll venture a heretical claim: I found the low ability student surprisingly open to appreciation of poetry and quite able to find fresh poetical images with which to express himself. Although unable to support it statistically (but that won't stop me) I claim this conclusion is the result of the great amount of emotion this type of student keeps locked within: the great knot of school failures, parental downgradings, envy, jealousy and all-around frustration that the college prep cherub has learned to sublimate. Surely the less able students suffer more daily at our pedagogical hands, and often leave school with lacerated nerves—to return to unhappy homes or to downgrading, but monetarily necessary, jobs. This child often finds

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nothing of satisfaction or pleasure in school, and therefore too often "drops out."

In scholarly wisdom, we tend to use poetry too much as a weapon to enforce our own middle class clichés. We too defensively thrust it on low ability students, daring them to not appreciate Emily Dickinson or William Wordsworth. When they rise to our daring bait, we triumphantly scorn with "they're helpless" to our colleagues.

II

Well, what did I try that was so different, you ask? Am I really insensitive (and unprofessional) enough to be unappreciative of Miss Dickinson and Mr. Wordsworth?

Actually, I did nothing revolutionary. I just allowed for more variety than usual in the study of poetry. I concentrated more on developing the students' individual tastes in poetry than on promulgating my own tastes. I selected 'each' poem primarily for its utility as a springboard for class discussion, often putting myself squarely in the position of "devil's advocate." I selected poems hoping that the pupils would react in extremes, regardless of whether positive or negative, thereby sparking fiery class discussions. One of our best discussions, for example, revolved around whether it is truly "good and just to die for the Fatherland." (As a supplementary activity I assigned reading Pirandello's short story "War.") To boys who often quit school to enlist, or are drafted immediately after high school, war, with both its degrading and glorious aspects, is a very real issue. Four girls in the class had boyfriends in Vietnam. Somehow, the petals of Wordsworth's daffodils do not hold this same discussion-radiating power.

I also decided to use some newly written Negro poetry. Since my own knowledge of up-and-coming black poets is spotty, I turned to students for help. They were thrilled to help—poetry was now not just academic, but closely related to their lives. One Negro girl proudly brought me some poems written by a friend of her sister at Howard University. We read it, neither flinching nor eliminating "honky" and "whore." We got into an excellent discussion of racial violence. Again, the daffodils pale.

The highlight of the whole unit, I feel, came from a list of ten project topics assigned via a mimeographed sheet. These topics were of varying difficulty, and ranged from a written or oral report on a poet's life *as related to his works* (to get away from the encyclopediac born—died format) to thematic comparisons of various

poems, to writing a collection of original poetry, experimenting in the various types we had discussed. To my delight, about half of these students decided to write original verses.

I stipulated that "a collection of poems" would, for our purposes, be at least seven and probably not more than thirty. I usually received ten to fifteen. The students would show their efforts to me from time to time during the two weeks before the due date; first shyly, then eagerly thrusting them at me before or after class. By seeing difficulties in writing creatively themselves, they were better able, I feel, to evaluate the attempts of others. The students came out of the unit with their stereotype of the effeminate poet smashed—they now had respect for his craft.

III

But what about the backbone of any poetry unit, you ask—what about scanning and meter and symbolism, ad infinitum? I guess I'm not really as heretical as I pretend, for I did teach these terms, too—in the very beginning, with a mimeographed sheet showing examples of all the major poetical terms and devices, and then we *used* them—neither as a crutch nor an academic exercise, but simply whenever we came to an example of each in a poem. Benet's "Lee," for example, has practically all of these devices within its length, but I tried to steer clear of "find an example of alliteration" and "what is the meter?" We talked instead about how the use of each device heightens the picture of Lee the man—how each allusion to the Greek heroes at the end, for example, specifically contributes to the picture. This seemed a perfect place, too, to reinforce the techniques of characterization we had discussed in connection with short stories and the novel, and would later review in the composition unit I had planned next. This comparison made the students even more appreciative of the skill with which the poet accomplishes so much in such a brief space.

The type of poetry I approached with the most apprehension is love poetry. Love is sometimes something about which this type of student, although often experienced sexually, feels awkward or embarrassed. Before getting to any of the poetry, I first played some of their favorite records—by James Brown, the Fifth Dimension, Janis Joplin (Excedrin headache #. . .). As homework that night, I asked each of them to write, in stanza form, the words of his favorite song. I collected them and discussed them visually in terms of poetical devices; *then* turned to "How Do I Love Thee?" As I had hoped, it now did not look so silly. At the end of our dis-

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cussion of love poetry we read "One Perfect Rose." They enjoyed it—relishing every morsel of satire. It led us into a scathing, but worthwhile discussion of materialism. (I often found myself ending a section with a Dorothy Parker poem. "Resume" is a punchy way to wrap up a discussion of death.)

IV

You probably notice that I was careful in selection of poems. I purposely avoided using the unappealing, outdated literature anthology's section of poetry. Instead, I projected poems for discussion.

At the end of the unit, not only had most of these low ability youngsters achieved an understanding of their own tastes in poetry through exposure to both "good" and "bad" poetry; they had read unusual poets like e.e. cummings and Ogden Nash and unusual forms like haiku and tanka. Even more important, many had become "poets"—had created their own works. Poetry had come alive, it related to their own thoughts and lives! For many it was a new hobby. It was meaningful.

In comparison, how the daffodils pale!

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